

A PHENOMENOLOGY OF COLLUSION

When it was revealed that the allegedly human remains found in 1908 at Piltdown, Sussex were not only part human and part ape but had also been stained and filed — that the mandible, for instance, was that of a recent hominoid ape, probably an orangutan, as was the canine tooth which had been reshaped and, along with the bone implement, deliberately discolored, as were the human skull fragments that had been treated with an iron solution so as to match the hue of the Piltdown gravels but which had been shown, on the basis of studies both radiometric and fluorometric, to be "plants," like all of the associated fauna at Piltdown, some of which were not even of English origin and none of which, apparently, even came from Piltdown in the first place, so that the soi-disant human remains, originally alleged to be from the lower Pleistocene epoch and from 200,000 to 1,000,000 years old, were therefore revealed to be no more than 50,000 years old — the usual questions were asked, the answer to any of them being hard enough to come by, although there was a group of four principals upon whom suspicion might be directed and of whom at least one had to be guilty, the four being Charles Dawson, an Uckfield solicitor and amateur scientist, Arthur Keith, a demonstrator in anatomy at the London Hospital, the French Jesuit priest and paleontologist and philosopher Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, and Arthur Smith Woodward, Keeper of Geology at the British Museum and the person responsible for the initial interpretation and reconstruction of the Piltdown skull, of whom, from the beginning, Dawson looked the fishiest, according to, among others, a Captain Guy St. Barbe, who confessed that he had visited Dawson one day and found him surrounded by chemicals and dishes in which he was staining the bones but decided to say nothing for the sake of Mrs. Dawson and also because he thought Dawson was being blackmailed (not true), as well as the South African anatomist Joseph S. Weiner, who saw the remains in 1953 and believed they were forgeries, his inquiries leading him to one Harry Morris, amateur archeologist now deceased, who also suspected that a deception had been carried out at Piltdown

and had preserved some notes on that subject
as well as a spurious stone instrument, received from
Dawson,
which he had kept in a cabinet that had been swapped
to a Frederick Wood of Ditchling for a collection of birds'
eggs, Wood too now being dead but his widow having kept
the cabinet complete with the abovementioned stone implement
on which Morris had written, "Stained by C. Dawson with
the intent to defraud (all). - H.M.," unlikely though it was
that Dawson could have perpetrated this hoax unaided or
even unseen,
due to the difficulty of salting the gravel pit unobserved,
since the inhabitants of a nearby manor had an uninterrupted
view of the site, and also to the probability that,
as in any small rural community, strangers would have been
spotted quickly and viewed with suspicion, as one was
by a Mabel Kenward, who said that early one evening she saw
a man
come over the field and across the hedges and ditches
and begin to scratch around in the pit, she saying,
"Excuse me,
are you an authorized searcher?" and he disappearing
like a ghost, retreating wordlessly across the fields,
this tall man in his ordinary grey suit and wellingtons
who — aha!
fit the general description of Keith — leaving Woodward
innocent though professionally disgraced, as was Teilhard,
evidently brought in as a kind of unwitting character witness
(who, after all, would doubt the word of a priest?)
since the forgers took care to have both around whenever
something important was about to be discovered and thus be
cruelly duped by the one forger, Dawson, who wanted to
become
a Fellow of the Royal Society, and the other forger, Keith,
who, though renowned in the field of anatomy, wanted to be
celebrated in anthropology, his first love, and about the
two of
whom nearly everything is now known except what, as they
conspired, they said to each other, if anything, or if
almost
nothing was said, phrases like if you and one might suppose
and tomorrow at dusk but not much more than that,
the least amount of words accompanied by an economical hand
gesture or two and then the silence in which desire
grows bigger and bigger and the fear of punishment becomes
so small that it finally disappears and nothing is left

except a singleness of purpose not all that different,
the enormous cunning and intelligence of the counterfeiters

notwithstanding, from the desire for corn, say, on the part
of the goose Chipper, who appears in photo after photo
showing Dawson and Woodward hard at work in the gravel pit
alongside a black dog, unidentified, and their laborer,
the ironically-named "Venus" Hargreaves, Christian name
unknown.

ANACHARSIS CLOOTS

The lawn of the Gamma Phi Beta House
is crowded with eager young women
among whom I am making my way
when a frat boy in a "Rush Security" t-shirt
asks me to walk on the other side of the street,
tells me to "respect the university."
Respect the university?
In my own mind, I am the university:
I teach, do research,
serve on important committees.
For a moment I cock my head
to one side like a dog
and then I take his meaning:
he is afraid I will force myself on the virgins
that he and his brothers
have reserved for their own use.
They are all white, the virgins.
I wonder how it would be
to see some red
on this portrait of young womanhood,
maybe some lemon or ocher,
not to mention the rich hues
of the African-American palette:
freckly sunny yellow, cafe au lait,
grape-purple black.
And I think of Melville, of Moby-Dick,
of Ishmael calling his shipmates,
who are of every hue and nationality,
an "Anacharsis Cloots delegation"
after the French Revolutionary
who spent his fortune
for the advancement of the humanitarian ideals
to which he was fanatically devoted,
at one point bringing to the National Assembly
a delegation of foreigners
as "ambassadors of the human race."
He was sincere but eccentric —
in the end, too eccentric for Monsieur Robespierre
and the other members of the Committee of Public Safety.